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FRAGONARD'S L'AMOUR—As a Valentine

MADAME VALENTINE



Course we know that the post office has an important function in connection with St. Valentine's day. It distributes the valentines. But how many people stop to think that, were it not for cheap postage, the sending and receiving of valentines would be so expensive as to be confined to the wealthy? It is low postage that has made the custom a popular one.

This is very well brought out in William S. Walsh's "Curiosities of Popular Customs," when he says that in the days of quill pens and dear postage the transmission of valentines through the post was an expensive luxury. The amorous swains of that period had to content themselves and their idolized fair ones with thick sheets of gilt-edged letter-paper,—envelopes had not then come into use, and book postage was still unknown,—the first page of each sheet being adorned with a gilt Cupid, carefully gummed on, surmounting a few lines, the favourite formula announcing in terms still held sacred to St. Valentine that because the rose is red and the violet blue, therefore the sender is as sweet as sugar.

With the reduction of the heavy postal charges printed valentines gradually came into use. They gener-

ally consisted of a gaudily coloured picture, representing a loving couple seated in a bower, with a church in the distance, and a few lines descriptive of the tender sentiments of the persons forwarding the same. The designers of these amatory billets seem to have entertained rather singular notions respecting the proper attire of the ladies and gentlemen of whose feelings they sought to become the interpreters. The lady was invariably dressed in a scarlet gown, with a blue or green shawl; the gentleman was attired in lavender trousers, yellow waistcoat, blue surtout, and green or crimson cravat. The effect thus obtained was, as might be imagined, somewhat striking; but our fathers and mothers were apparently satisfied with these quaint productions. The introduction of the cheap postage of today laid the foundation of the present trade in valentines, the manufacture of which now constitutes an important branch of industrial activity, furnishing, directly or indirectly, employment to several thousand persons of both sexes.

The famous old diarist, Pepys, from whom we derive so much information regarding old customs, gives the first record of a drawing or illustration as connected with the day. This is under date of February 14th, 1667: "This morning came up to my wife's bedside little Will Mercer to be her valentine, and brought her name writ upon blue paper, in gold letters, done by himself

very pretty; and we were both well pleased with it." Another innovation is mentioned under the same date: "I do first observe the drawing of mottoes as well as of names; so that Pierce, who drew my wife's, did draw also a motto. Her motto was 'most courteous and most fair,' which, as it may be used for an anagram upon each name, might be very pretty."

And so in the pages of Pepys can be traced the hint for the modern valentine. It only remained to join the illustration and the motto, to enlarge the latter into a verse, original or selected, and to give the sender an unlimited choice as to the person or persons whom he should favour. Exactly when this union of qualities was effected we have no later Pepys to inform us. But we know that by the beginning of the last century the new method had fully established itself in popular favour.

That St. Valentine, who was a bishop in Rome and was sanctified for martyrdom, had anything whatever to do with the popular observance of his day, has been disputed on various authoritative grounds. Yet so delightful is the custom itself, that Charles Lamb was moved to pen the following tribute to the unauthenticated yet popularly accepted patron saint of the day: "Like

unto thee, assuredly, there is no mitred father in the calendar; not Jerome, nor Ambrose, nor Cyril; nor the consignor of undipt infants to eternal torments, Austin, whom all mothers hate; nor he who hated all mothers, Origen; nor Bishop Bull, nor Archbishop Parker, nor Whitgift. Thou comest attended with thousands and ten thousands little Loves, and the air is

Brush't with the hiss of rustling wings.

"Singing Cupids are thy chorister, and thy precentors, and instead of the crozier the mystical arrow is borne before thee."

It is a fact that practically all the general Christian festivals of the year are relics of pagan custom—*i. e.* correspond with them in point of actual date or period. So there is no surprise in being told that St. Valentine's day is

the Christianized form of the classic Lupercalia, which were feasts held in Rome during the month of February in honour of Pan and Juno and known as Juno Februata. Among other ceremonies it was customary to put the names of young women into a box, from which they were drawn by the men as chance directed. The Christian clergy, finding it difficult to extirpate the pagan practice, strove to give it a religious aspect by substituting names of particular saints for those of women.



A Valentine of 1820

"Behold, my fair, yon distant spire,
Oh, let this ring thy Heart inspire
To join me at its Holy shrine:
'Tis Love invites, haste, haste, away,
And Blefs me on this happy Day,
By ever being mine."

Thus Butler, in his "Lives of the Saints," explains that pastors of the Christian Church worked zealously to eradicate the vestiges of the pagan superstition in the festival of the Lupercalia, and sought to accomplish this by the simple process of retaining the ceremonies, but modifying their significance. They substituted for the drawing of names in honour of the goddess Februata Juno, the names of some particular saints. But as the festival of the Lupercalia took place during February, 14th of that month, St. Valentine's Day was selected for his new-old feast, as occurring about the same time. The saints whose names were drawn were proposed for imitation to the persons who received the slips of paper whereon they were written, and in many religious houses, each member of the community preserved his billet during the year, as an incitement to imitate the virtues and invoke the special intercession of his holy Valentine.

One can, however, well imagine youth, as it received its names of saints by lot, sticking its tongue in its cheek and laughing in its heart, while letting

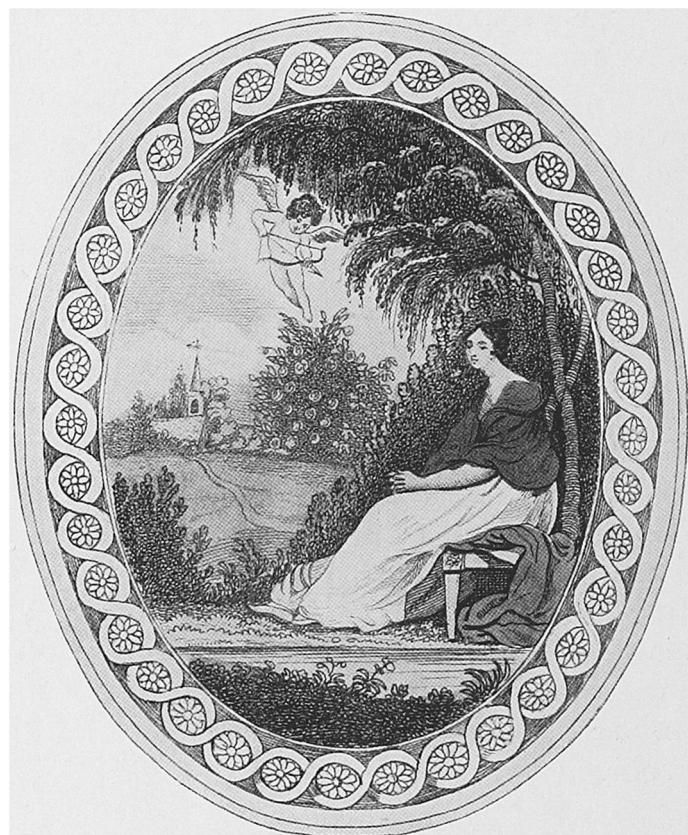
its eyes dance on the fair form of comely maid. For, as Mr. Walsh wittily observes, see how strong is the old Adam in the hearts of the unregenerate. Wanton youth was not satisfied to imitate these holy fathers and ballot for a ghostly partner in heaven. It longed for tangible flesh and blood here on earth—flesh and blood of that delightful variety which has a spice of the devil in it and is known as woman. So it went back to something like the pagan custom.

This was at least as early as the fourteenth century, as witness these lines in a poem written by John Lydgate in praise of Catherine, the wife of Henry V:

Seynte Valentine of
custome yeere by yeere
Men have an usu-
ance, in this regioun,

To loke and serche Cupides kalendere,
And chose theyr choyse by grete affeccioun,
Such as ben move with Cupides mocioun,
Takynge theyre choyse as theyre sort doth falle;
But I love oon whiche excelleth alle.

But again, this time in the latter part of the sixteenth century the Church, in the person of St. Francis de Sales, stepped in to sanctify the rites of St. Valentine's Day. Butler tells us that St. Francis "severely forbad the custum of valentines, or giving boys in writing the name of girls to be admired



A Valentine 1824

"Thus may the Archer turn on thee,
Those arms of Love which conquer'd me."

and attended on by them ; and, to abolish it, he changed it into giving billets with the names of certain Saints, for them to honour and imitate in a particular manner.

But once more the boys and the girls triumphed over the Church, and in this triumph the girls even wrested from the boys their exclusive privilege of choosing mates. In France the names of young people of both sexes were written out and put into proper receptacles, and drawings took place, in which each sex could secure a partner from the other, and it was customary for the sentimental bond set up by the selection so made to inure for one year and no longer, unless, as a sarcastic bachelor observes, "terminated by the marriage or death of the parties." During the year each stood to the other in the relation of Cavalier and Lady of Beauty, the knight being bound to the honour and defence of his fair one, for which she repaid him in smiles and silk favours, when silk was obtainable and too much good-natured encouragement was not strictly forbidden by parents and guardians.

The same mutuality obtained across the Channel, according to Misson, who tells us, in his "Travels in England" (1698) that on the eve of St. Valentine's Day "an equal number of Maids and Bachelors get together, each writes their true or some feigned name upon separate billets, which they roll up and

draw by way of lots, the Maids taking the Men's billets, and the Men the Maids' ; so that each of the young Men lights upon a Girl that he calls his Valentine, and each of the Girls upon a young Man which she calls hers. By this means each has two Valentines—but the Man sticks faster to the Valentine that is fallen to him than to the Valentine to whom he is fallen. Fortune having thus divided the company into so many couples, the Valentines give balls and treats to their mistresses, wear their billets several days upon their bosoms or sleeves, and this little sport often ends in Love. This ceremony is practised differently in different countries, and according to the freedom or severity of Madame Valentine. There is another kind of Valentine, which is the first young Man or Woman chance throws in your way in the street, or elsewhere," on Valentine's Day itself. The latter appears at an early date to have been the manner in Scotland, if Sir Walter is right in his description of the wooing of the Fair Maid of Perth and of Hal of the Wynd. Even a more notable example is Ophelia's song :

Good morrow, 'tis St. Valentine's Day,
All in the morn betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your valentine.

And with this verse by the greatest English man of letters THE LOTUS may well conclude its observations of "Madame Valentine"—as Misson casually, yet so felicitously calls the saint.